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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: 13 UNIVERSITIES FAIL TO MAKE THE GRADE

¶1. Summary: On February 26, the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) revoked the operating licenses of 9 private universities and sanctioned 4 others due to their failure to meet basic requirements stipulated in the Law on Education. Affected private university representatives complain that state support of public schools is often at the expense of private universities, and they have criticized the MOES for giving little warning of its decision. While some preliminary arrangements have been made to transfer students from closed schools, the mechanism to do so has not yet been determined. Although the abruptness and timing of the decision are unfortunate, the move itself is positive, reflecting a greater emphasis by the GOAM on educational reforms and enforcement of educational standards. End summary.

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SEEKING EDUCATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY  
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¶2. On February 26, the Educational Programs Licensing Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science revoked the operating licenses of 9 private universities. The decision effectively denies the status of "private educational institution" to the schools. Another 4 private universities are no longer able to offer certain specializations. According to MOES representatives, the decision to revoke the universities' licenses was made based on the schools' failure to comply with requirements stipulated in the Law on Education. Officials cited drastically decreased student enrollment due to lack of demand, corruption concerns, facilities that are not up to code, and the failure of universities to meet curriculum standards.

¶3. The Committee's decision reflects comments by top ranking GOAM representatives, who for several months have publicly advocated the need to reorganize the private higher education system. The issue has received wide public resonance, and has been extensively covered by the national press. RA Minister of Education Spartak Seyranyan, interviewed by Haylur TV on the subject, indicated that enforcing educational standards deters corruption and improves the credibility of institutes of higher education. Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian, who has repeatedly stated that the educational sector is a government priority, declared public support for the Licensing Committee's findings. He echoed Seyranyan's comments in a recent press conference, noting that "Our requirements for institutes of higher education must be tough and without exception" in order to ensure educational competitiveness in a global economy.

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DOES ARMENIA REALLY NEED 100 UNIVERSITIES?  
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¶4. The Committee's findings called into question the necessity of 80 private institutions of higher education in a country of only 3 million people, noting that the number of prospective university entrants has decreased. (The decrease is most likely due to a 1992-1994 demographic "baby bust" caused by hardships following independence, including a conflict with Azerbaijan). MOES officials have noted that their concern also reflects the government's commitment to quality assurance at the higher education level, reflected in the working papers of the Bologna process. This process requires a wide spectrum of educational reforms, including preventing corruption and meeting European curriculum standards.

¶5. While it is generally accepted that the infrastructures of many private universities suffer significant disrepair and courses and texts have been slow to change, many private school administrators note that state support of public schools often comes at the expense of their institutions. They argue that the Armenian higher

education system, in general, reflects a Soviet legacy where emphasis is placed on state-sponsored education. (Note: There are currently 20 state universities in Armenia, the strongest of which receive the most state support. After independence, the market opened for private educational institutions. But while the MOES made accreditation procedures relatively uncomplicated, state support and private endowments were not forthcoming, and the status of degrees from private universities has remained dubious.)

¶6. Graduates of private universities are generally not as competitive for limited job opportunities in state institutions, and students of private universities do not have access to certain benefits that public school students enjoy. For example, male students enrolled in private universities are subject to the military draft, whereas state-funded university students receive waivers until graduation. This effectively reduces the number of qualified male applicants each year in private institutions. Additionally, state sponsored schools have begun to offer extension and evening programs, which appeal to many prospective students who would have traditionally entered private institutions. The rectors of the 13 universities which have been affected stated that they have not violated any provisions of the Law on Education, and that they were given no warning to address MOES concerns. They further indicated they intend to sue the MOES.

¶7. The Minister of Education and Science is expected to approve the Committee's findings, and the decision will be enforced immediately. Deputy Minister of Education Ara Avetisyan has assured "top students" at affected institutions that they will be offered the opportunity to continue their education at a university of their choice. However, while the Council of Rectors representing state universities has expressed its support, it is not yet clear how this transfer will be organized.

¶8. Comment: The closing of underperforming private universities is a welcome step toward quality assurance and meeting Bologna process obligations. There remains an abundance of private institutions that provide access to higher education and do meet MOES standards. PAS continues to work with high achieving private universities by supporting their curriculum development and U.S. studies interests through PAS programming, including sponsoring Embassy speakers and through the Fulbright program. End comment.

Pennington